

Individual Cultural Orientations among Distance Learners

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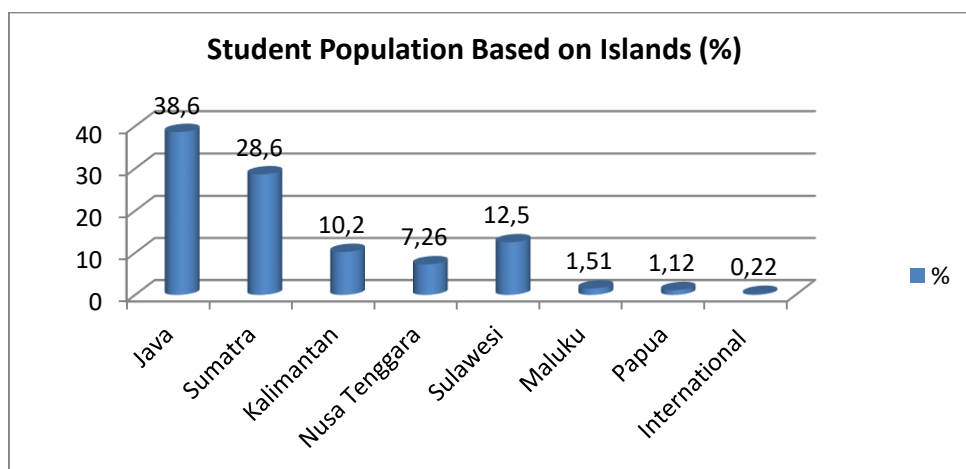
Abstracts

Distance learners generally consist of multicultural students spread out over different regions. However, the variation of students' cultural backgrounds are generally neglected in understanding students' needs and persistence in open and distance learning. This paper aims to explain individual cultural orientation among distance learners and its relationship with student support at Universitas Terbuka Indonesia. The study used an online survey to investigate students' individualism and collectivism. The results of the survey indicated that more than 50% of participants had positive responses to both individualism and collectivism. Moreover, the majority of participants was statistically indicated to have both individualism and collectivism. These results interestingly revealed that to some extent individualism and collectivism might exist together on the individual level. Finally, this study findings may be relevant for distance education institutions in providing student supports related to students' needs.

A. Introduction

The student population of the Indonesia Open University (Universitas Terbuka) spread out in the seven main islands of Java, Sumatra, Kalimantan, Nusa Tenggara, Sulawesi, Maluku, Papua and over hundred ethnic groups including international students (Universitas Terbuka, 2012a). There are over 1,000 ethnic/sub-ethnic groups in Indonesia and the largest ethnic group is the Javanese who make up 41.71% of the total population (Muller & Vothknecht, 2013; Suryadinata, Arifin, & Ananta, 2003). However, the variation of students' cultural backgrounds are generally neglected in understanding students' needs and persistence in open and distance learning, particularly in Indonesia Open University. Dunbar (1991) in his observation of distance education in Indonesia said that the "fundamental cause of distance education failure in Indonesia has been the adoption of Western models, without adaptation to suit the acculturated behaviours of Indonesian teachers and learners". In addition, Ramanujam (2001) asserts that Indonesia has a large population, a strong Islamic culture, an oral tradition of teaching which hold the teachers with high respect and assume learners as receivers of knowledge. Therefore, the successful of distance education in Indonesia and developing countries in general is not only depending on the creative adaptation of a western successful model but also needs the psychological and cultural preparedness of both the teachers and learners.

Therefore, this study seeks to investigate individual cultural orientation among distance learners and its relationship with student support at Universitas Terbuka Indonesia.



Source: UT in Numbers (Universitas Terbuka, 2012b).

Figure 1: Student population based on Islands

B. Theoretical Framework

1. Cultural Orientation

In the wider context of distance learning and teaching, Gunawardena et al. (2003) through the review of the literature has indicated little published research on the cultural aspects of distance education. Furthermore, Gunawardena et al. (2003) contended that there were many definitions of culture and suggested to considering the definition of culture put forward by Matsumoto (1996) in explaining the effects of learner cultural orientation in online learning. Matsumoto (1996) perceived culture as “the sets of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next” (p. 16). As Matsumoto notes, this definition suggests that culture is as much an individual, psychological construct as it is a social construct. “Individual differences in culture can be observed among people in the degree to which they adopt and engage in the attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors that, by consensus, constitute their culture” (Matsumoto, 1996, p. 18).

From the previous studies, the major dimension of cultural orientation that be used to delineating intercultural differences in behaviour within distance education setting is individualism–collectivism (IC) (Al-Harthi, 2010; Guifrída, 2006). Individualism–collectivism (IC) refers to the degree to which a culture encourages, fosters, and facilitates the needs, wishes, desires, and values of an autonomous and unique self over those of a group (Matsumoto, 1996). In a collectivist culture, society tends to value independence, competition, and emotional detachment from one’s in-group, such as family, tribe, working group, etc. they also place personal goals over the goals of the in-group (Guifrída, 2006). While members of individualistic cultures see themselves as separate and autonomous individuals, members of collectivist cultures see themselves as fundamentally connected with others (Gunawardena, 2003). Collectivist societies value interdependence, group

harmony, and emotional attachment within the in-group, especially between parent and child (Guifrida, 2006).

Individualism–collectivism (IC) differences should vary in different social contexts. People act differently depending on whom they are interacting with and the situation in which the interaction is occurring. A person could have collectivistic tendencies at home and with close friends and individualistic tendencies with strangers or at work. While individuals can be quite collectivist in an individualistic culture, individuals in a collectivist culture can be quite individualistic. Furthermore, Individualistic cultures tend to have more in-groups because individuals have more access to in-groups; however, members are not strongly attached to any single in-group. Members therefore tend to drop out of groups that are too demanding, and their relationships within their groups are marked by a high level of independence or detachment. In collectivist cultures, depending on the effective functioning of the group, a member's commitment to an in-group is greater. Collectivists keep stable relationships with their in-groups no matter what the cost and exhibit a high level of interdependence with members of their groups. It is important to examine this line of research further in the context of computer-mediated collaborative groups (Gunawardena, 2003).

Gelfand et al. (2004) contended that empirical research on individualism and collectivism fall into three levels: the societal level, the organizational level, and the individual level. There has been a long tradition of research on individualism and collectivism at the societal level. For example self-emphasis and collectivity (Parsons, 1949), *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft* (Tonnies, 1957), mechanical and organic solidarity (Durkheim, 1933), individualism and collaterality (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck), individualism versus collectivism by Hofstede (1980), and Triandis and colleagues (1986). In contrast to the societal level, culture at the organisational level is construed as organisational members' shared beliefs and assumption. In general, organisations that have individualistic cultures would have members who consider themselves as largely independent of the organisation. While organisations that have collectivist cultures would have members who view themselves as highly interdependent with the organisation. The next level of analysis is the individual level that capitalises on intracultural variability and examines dimensions that are derived from individual differences. In more recent years, there has been an explosion of measures that have been developed to assess individualism and collectivism at the individual level. For instance Estonia et al (1997) found that collectivism is higher in rural locations and individualism is higher in urban locations. Furthermore, Smith and Schwartz (1997) reported that individualism and collectivism have correlation with social background such as age, education, and socioeconomic status. Particularly, younger and more educated individuals tend to be more individualistic than older and less educated individuals across numerous nations.

Oyserman, Coon, and Kimmelmeier (2002) conducted meta analyses of the literature comparing (European) Americans with others on individualism and collectivism (IND–COL). All three authors contended that the core element of individualism was the assumption that individuals are independent of one another. While for collectivism was the assumption that groups bind and mutually obligate individuals. In the review of IND–COL scales of 83 empirical studies, the authors

found that there was no single standard or common measure to assessing IND–COL. However, the authors delineated the three most common measurement tools for IND–COL: (a) the Independent–Interdependent (Self Construal Scale) scale (Singelis, 1994), used in 19 US and international studies, (b) the Horizontal–Vertical Collectivism–Individualism scale (Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk, & Gelfand, 1995), used by 16 US and international studies, and (c) the INDCOL measure (Hui, 1988), which was applied in 10 international studies.

Moreover, Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier (2002) conducted content analysis of all IND–COL scales and succeeded to identifying seven IND scales and eight COL scales as the most major measure. The seven IND scales included personal independence, personal achievement, self-knowledge, uniqueness, privacy, clear communication, and competition. Meanwhile, the eight COL scales consisted of sense of duty to group, relatedness to others, seeking others' advice, harmony, working in group, contextual self, and valuing hierarchy. Furthermore, the authors agreed on that the core of IND scale was valuation of personal independence and for COL, the consensually agreed on element is sense of obligation and duty to the in-group.

Shulruf, Hattie, & Dixon (2003) performed a study in order to establish a reliable and easy to use measurement tool for collectivism and individualism, which avoids weaknesses of previous tools. The study involved 206 Undergraduate students who were studying education and visual art at the University of Auckland. The major finding from the factor analysis of 66 items was the presence of six interpretable factors, three relating to Individualism (compete, Unique, and Responsibility), and three to Collectivism (Advice, Harmony, and Closeness).

With regard to empirical evidence in Open and Distance Learning (ODL), there seems to have been very little research on the effect of learner cultural orientation on student progress in distance education settings. A study addressing cultural orientation and retention was conducted by Vasti Torres (2006) at commuter urban universities. This mixed methods study aimed to investigate the effect of cultural orientation on retention for Latino/a students in non-traditional commuter environment. In the qualitative phase, the study revealed three themes emerging from the interviews and developed the initial conceptualised model for retention. The three themes are “come to class and leave”, “unsure I could make it”, and “show me the way”. By using social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) as theoretical lens, the author connected the emergent themes to aspects of social cognitive theory. Accordingly, the themes of “come to class and leave” and “unsure I could make it” illustrated the environmental influences that students had to develop in order to persist. The theme, “come to class and leave,” illustrated the influence of family responsibility and family status. The theme, “unsure I could make it” illustrated some of the aspects of academic difficulty and satisfaction with faculty and interplays with the comfort level students feel within their environment (cultural affinity). These environmental influences were considered the exogenous variables that influenced the latent variables: (a) family status—representing parents' level of education, (b) family responsibilities—which considers obligations that may interfere with school work, (c) cultural affinity—which represents the presence of other Latino/as in the college environment, (d) satisfaction with faculty—which looks at students' impression of the faculty as well as potential adult mentors, and

(e) academic difficulties—which considers students’ self-perception of their cognitive abilities. Meanwhile, the theme “show me the way,” illustrated that the experiences students had while in the college environment centered on relational issues. There were influential mentors, advisors, faculty, friends, and/or family that encouraged them to be in college.

The quantitative phase of the study explained the results of testing of conceptualised model by using SEM (Structural Equation Modelling). The results of quantitative analysis indicated that the hypothesised model had good overall data-model fit. This would indicate that the hypothesized model using a social cognitive theory lens is a plausible explanation of the influences on the Intent to Persist in college for Latino/a urban university students. In considering the effects of the latent variables Academic Integration, Institutional Commitment, and Encouragement on the variable Intent to Persist; Only Institutional Commitment had a strong and significant direct effect on Intent to Persist. Meanwhile, the effects of Academic Integration and Encouragement on Intent to Persist were not significant influences. The role of institutional commitment was interpreted in this study as the ability to reflect on the environment and to accept the college experience as an important part of the students’ life. Once students see college as an important aspect of their lives, they are better able to create symbols that help them conceptualise how to better manage their behavior, the environment, and the personal and cognitive factors that impact their ability to succeed in college. Finally, there are two exogenous variables that have the largest influence on the endogenous variables: cultural affinity and satisfaction with faculty. Moreover, the analysis of the total effects yielded that largest total effect (the sum of direct and indirect effect components) occurred between Cultural Affinity and Intent to Persist, through both encouragement and institutional commitment. This total effect highlights the influence of having Latino/a culture represented within the environment and among faculty, staff, and students as an important and significant role in students’ intent to persist (Torres, 2006).

Another study of cultural orientation in distance education was conducted by Al-Harthi (2010). This study aimed to address differences in self-regulation (planning, effort, self-efficacy, self-checking, help-seeking, and time and study environment management) between Arab and American distance learners; differences in cultural orientation (future time perspective and group interdependence) between Arab and American distance learners; and the best model (variance and covariance structure) to explain the relationship between learner self-regulation and cultural orientation. The findings of the study revealed that both Arab and American students realise that self-regulation had important role in distance learning. In terms of group interdependence, Americans were found to be more group interdependent than Arabs. In contrast, it was found that future orientation among American learners was higher than Arab students. Moreover, this research confirmed only one link in the model: the link from future orientation to metacognition and motivation. Other cultural measures were either found to be insignificant (group interdependence) or unreliable and were not used in the model.

2. Student Support

In this study, student support indicates to the range of services both for individuals and for students in groups which complement the course material or learning

resources that are uniform for all learners (Tait, 2000). Meanwhile, the term of student persistence relates to the behaviour of continuing learning in the course programme by continuation of enrolment within four consecutive semesters. In the Indonesia Open University, the students who are enrolled within four consecutive semesters are grouped into active students; otherwise those who do not enrol and do not register for any new course within four consecutive semesters will be classified into inactive students. A review of prior studies on student persistence in the Open University contexts revealed that student support has a pivotal contribution for increasing student persistence (Choi et al., 2013; Dzakaria, 2005; Fozdar et al., 2006; Ibrahim, Rwegasira, & Taher, 2007; Tait, 2004).

There are two (2000) two main factors determining the direction of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) development, and the way how student support is delivered: the revolution of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) and the marketization of education. ICT revolution has provided many options for ODL institutions in offering student support regardless time and place through virtual environments. In the meantime, the marketization of education has shifted the old perspective on how to deal with students in ODL into a new perspective as 'customer' (Tait, 2000). By admitting a customer culture in ODL inevitably lead to speeding up in delivering student support services.

Furthermore, Tait (2000) described three primary interdependent functions of student support in a ODL programmes: 1) cognitive: supporting and developing learning through the mediation of the standard and uniform elements of course materials and learning resources for individual students; 2) affective: providing an environment which support students, creates commitment, and enhance self-esteem; and 3) ysystemic: establishing administrative processes and information management systems which are effective, transparent and overall student-friendly.

C. Method

This study employed a survey method which focused on collecting and analysing, quantitative data (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Hesse-Biber, 2010). This survey started with the collection and analysis of quantitative data, which has the priority of explaining individual cultural orientation and student in the Indonesia Open University. In this study, the quantitative data were collected by using a web-survey. The population of this study was the undergraduate students of Faculty of Social and Political Sciences who enrolled from admission period of 2009/2010 to 2011/2012. The total number of 6,095 students were invited by email to participate in the web-survey. Out of 6,095 invited students, only 153 respondents completed the questionnaire.

D. Findings

1. Demographic Data

The most typical age of participants was between 25 and 29 and the majority of them were men. Moreover, their ethnicity was predominantly identified as Javanese; they were mostly graduated from Senior High School; they were employed full-time; and they were primarily married and had children under 18.

The majority of participants undertook the course programme of English for Translation, followed then by Government Science. They were predominantly registered in the regional office of Jakarta and were identified as the active students. Furthermore, the most cited reason of non-enrolment for at least one registration period or more was workloads.

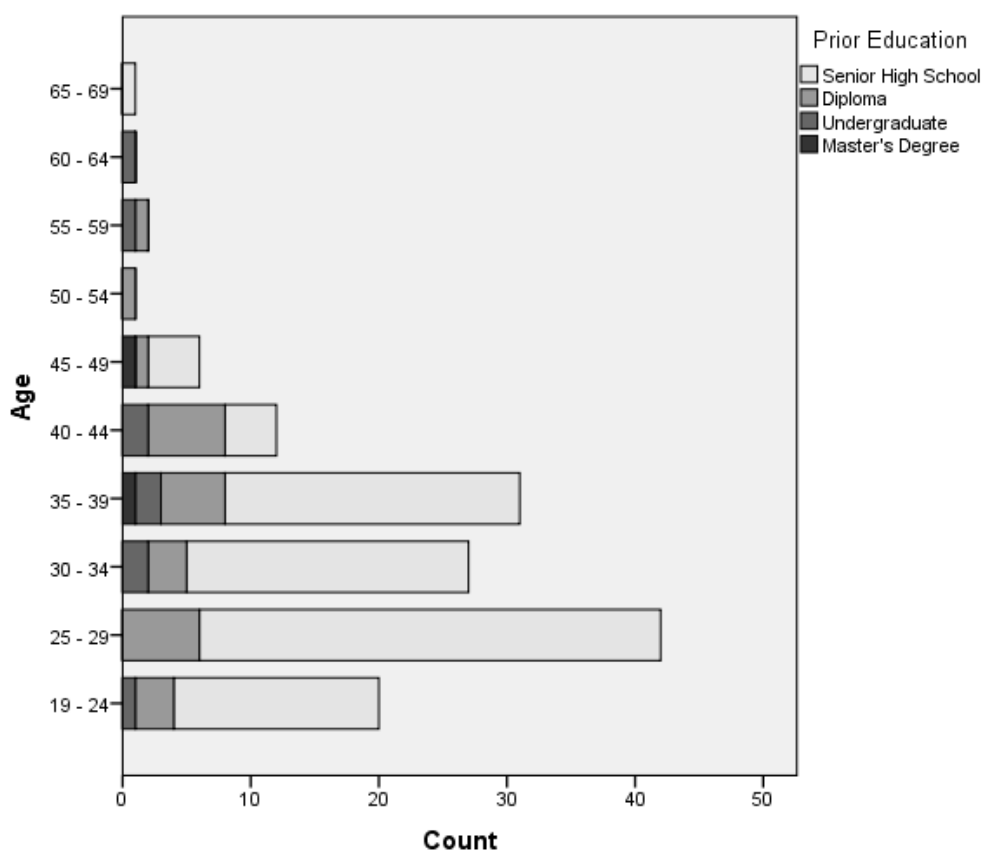


Figure 2. Students' prior education by age category

2. Cultural Orientation

Cultural orientation consists of two scales: independent and interdependent orientations. Independent orientation includes 7 items and interdependent orientation encompasses 6 items.

Independent orientation

The majority of participants from both the active (65.8%) and the inactive group (62.5%) agreed with the statement (I tend to do my own thing). 22.8% of the active group and 29.2% of the inactive group strongly agreed with the statement. 10.5 % of the active group and 8.3% of the inactive group were unsure with the statement. Furthermore, 0.9% of the active group disagreed with the statement.

The next statement focused on the encouragement from the family members. Most of the participants from both the active (58.4%) and the inactive group (63.2%) agreed that their family members encouraged them to be independent people in many respects. 34.8% of participants from the active group and 15.8% of participants from the inactive group strongly agreed with the statement. Meanwhile, 6.7% of the active group and 10.5% of the inactive group were unsure about the statement. Finally, 10.5% of the inactive group disagreed with the statement.

The third item revealed about decision-making pertinent to personal problems. The majority of participants from both active and inactive groups (44.0% and 62.5%) agreed that they tend to make their own decisions when they encountered difficult personal problems. Moreover, 13.1% of the active group and 6.3% of the inactive group strongly agreed about their decision-making abilities. Meanwhile, 20.2% of participants from the active student group and 25.0% of participants from the inactive group were unsure about such decision-making. At the same time, 21.4% of participants from the active group and 6.3% of participants from the inactive group disagreed with the statement. Meanwhile, 1.2% of the active group strongly disagreed with the statement.

The fourth item reported on the willingness to perform better than others on academic assignments. The findings revealed that most of the participants from the active group (60.5%) and just under half of the inactive group (47.8%) agreed with the statement. 28.1% of active group and 26.1% of the inactive group strongly agreed with the statement. Meanwhile, 7.0% of the active group and 4.3% of the inactive group were unsure about the statement. Finally, 4.4% of the active group and 4.3% of the inactive group disagreed with the statement.

The fifth item talked about the importance of ability to take care of themselves. 57.4% of participants from the active student group and 50.0% of participants from the inactive group agreed with the statement. 39.1% of participants from the active group and 45.8% of participants from the inactive group strongly agreed with the statement. Meanwhile, only 2.6% of participants from the active group and 4.2% of participants from the inactive group were unsure with the statement. Finally, 0.9% of active group strongly disagreed with the statement.

The next item, 51.2% of participants from the active student group and 41.2% of participants from the inactive student group agreed that they were able to enjoy participating in competitive circumstances. 29.8% of participants from the active group and 11.8% of participants from the inactive group strongly agreed with the statement. In the meantime, 10.7% of participants from the active group and 35.3% of participants from the inactive group were unsure about the statement. 7.1% of participants from the active group and 5.9% of participants from the inactive student disagreed with the statement. Only, 1.2% of participants from the active group and 5.9% of participants from the inactive group strongly disagreed with the statement.

The final item talked about the personal uniqueness. 45.5% of participants from the active group and 50.0% of participants from the inactive group agreed with the statement. 20.0% of participants from the active group and 18.2% of participants from the inactive group strongly agreed with the statement.

Meanwhile, 17.3% of participants from the active group and 22.7% of inactive group were unsure with the statement. 13.6% of participants from the active group and 9.1% of the inactive group disagreed with the statement. Finally, only 3.6% of participants from the active group strongly disagreed with the statement.

Interdependent Orientation

This scale encompassed six items measuring interdependent cultural orientation from both active and inactive student groups. Overall, the median scores for both active and inactive student groups were 4.0 respectively. These findings indicated that the majority of participants had high interdependent cultural orientation in their social life.

In terms of the first item, most participants from both the active and the inactive groups (60.5% and 58.3%) agreed that they always respect decisions made by the group or organization. Furthermore, 34.2% of the active group and 29.2% of the inactive group strongly agreed about the willingness to respect decisions made by the group or organisation. Meanwhile, only 4.4% of active group and 12.5% of inactive group were unsure about the statement. Moreover, only 0.9% of active group disagreed with the statement.

The second item reported that 55.4% of the active group and 50% of the inactive group agreed that they always sacrifice their self-interests for the benefit of the group. 14.5% of the active group and 12.5% of the inactive group strongly agreed with the statement. Meanwhile, 21.7% of the active group and 31.3% of the inactive group were unsure with the statement. Finally, only 8.4% of the active group and 6.3% of the inactive group disagreed with the statement.

The third item dealt with decision-making. More than 50% of participants from the active and inactive student groups (54.8% and 59.1%) agreed that they always need consultation with the others before making decision. 26.1% of participants from the active group and 22.7% of participants from the inactive group strongly agreed with the statement. In the meantime, there were small proportions of undecided participants from the active group (9.6%) and the inactive group (18.2%). Moreover, only 9.6% of participants from the active group disagreed with the statement.

The fourth item talked about consultation of working and academic matters with the family members. The majority of the active group (45.9%) and the inactive group agreed (37.5%) that they always consult the working and academic matters with the family members. 18.8% of the active group and 6.3% of the inactive group strongly agreed with the statement. However, there were high numbers of undecided participants from the active group (21.2%) and the inactive group (31.3%). In the meantime, 12.9% of the active group and 25.0% of the inactive group disagreed, and only 1.2% of the active group strongly disagreed with the statement.

The fifth item revealed that the majority of the active group (47.4%) and the inactive group (52.2%) agreed that the relationship with others were more important than their self-interests. 20.2% of active group and 13.0% of the inactive group strongly agreed with the statement. Meanwhile, 18.4% of active

group and 8.7% of inactive group were unsure about the statement. 10.5% of active group and 26.1% of the inactive group disagreed with the statement. Finally, only 3.5% of the active group strongly disagreed with the statement.

The final item talked about the generosity. Most of the active group (48.7%) and the inactive group (56.5%) agreed that they would give financial aid for their relative. 46.1% of the active group and 39.1% of the inactive group strongly agreed with the statement. Meanwhile, only 3.5% of the active group and 4.3% of the inactive group provided unsure response. 0.9% of the active group disagreed with the statement. Lastly, only 0.9% of the active group strongly disagreed with the statement.

E. Summary

In terms of cultural orientation, the quantitative analysis reported that individualism and collectivism were not included in the model of student progress. After several statistical tests in the logistic regression analysis, the results indicated the participants who had high independent cultural orientation were more likely to have high self-efficacy and volitional strategies and in turn were more likely to be committed to student progress.

Furthermore, descriptive statistical analysis demonstrated that more than 50% of participants from the active and inactive student groups had positive responses and scored high in both individualism and collectivism. These findings interestingly revealed other points that to some extent individualism and collectivism might exist together on the individual level. Furthermore, in this case, individualism and collectivism probably were not always consistent with the societal level. According to Hofstede's study (2001), Indonesia is classified as a collectivistic and masculine culture and Indonesians are supposed to be predominantly interdependent. Therefore, individuals may have different cultural orientations regardless of their nationality, and have different cultural outlooks, even within the same country (Hwang, 2012; McCoy, Galletta, & King, 2005). Furthermore, Straub et al. (2002) argued that individuals may or may not identify with the national culture, and they can show a different cultural orientation even though they are in the same country.

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